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AUTHOR Shaunnessey, Maryann S.
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ABSTRACT

Pacing in the teaching of English as a second language (ESL) is considered. It is suggested that the problem of pacing is almost entirely a matter of teachers covering material so rapidly that the student frequently does not have the opportunity to integrate it. Since the recognition of sounds, symbols, and sentences is not mastery of them, it is important that students master the simpler structures on which the more complex English structures are based. Pacing begins in the goals the teacher sets for students and is enhanced through classroom drilling. The repetition drill per se is largely a matter of listen and repeat. By adding systems of visual cues, the exercise can also be used to teach reading skills, intonation patterns, and correct versus incorrect variations in sentence patterns. The teacher can drill oral and written questions and answers and at the same time provide intonation practice to a highly literate student (i.e., capable of structural substitutions). For a student who is semiliterate (particularly one who is unfamiliar with the spatial order of English), the teacher must combine oral drill with visual cues that encourage left-to-right movement across the page. Finally, for a barely literate student, the teacher must combine oral skills with those that develop discrimination of sentence, word, and letter boundaries, in that order. An instructional approach involving slot substitution for parts of sentences is illustrated. (SW)

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LESS IS MORE: PACING IN THE ESL CLASS

Maryann S. Shaunnessey
Senn High School

ED224349

Fundamental to good teaching is the selection of a well-sequenced core material. The language structures taught in such material should be easily identifiable, and should progress in relatively obvious fashion from easy to difficult. Such material forms the backbone of leveling classes from beginning to advanced (be there two, three, even five levels) and also provides the framework for the individual classes. Only when a core material has been selected and divided do all teachers know what is going on at each level. Within levels, teachers can concentrate on the thorough coverage of that part of the sequenced material and know where it fits in the scheme of the entire sequencing. They know that their students must achieve adequate mastery of the current portion of work, because it will not be duplicated at the next level. If teachers find they want to cover something that is not included in the sequencing, or is perhaps covered only briefly, they can supplement their work in such a way as to keep duplication of effort to a minimum.

In addition to the careful selection of a core curriculum, the importance of incorporating the following activities in teaching it cannot be overemphasized:

- memorization of core material
- question transformations and answers
- expansion of sentences through slot substitution
- accumulation of learnings
  - as frames of reference for future lesson development
  - as a basis for analogies and composition work.

Now consider the work of a primary class using the following sentence as the model.

At one o'clock, the young woman was reading in the library.

Transpose this to its natural order and it becomes:

The young woman was reading in the library at one o'clock.

Given this information, the following questions can be answered.

1. Who was reading in the library at one o'clock?
2. Which woman was reading in the library at one o'clock?
3. Was the young woman reading in the library at one o'clock?
4. Was the young woman reading in the library at two o'clock?
5. Was the young woman reading in the library at one or two o'clock?
6. What was the young woman doing at one o'clock?
7. Where was the young woman reading at one o'clock?
8. When was the young woman reading in the library?
9. What time was the young woman reading in the library?
10. The young woman was reading in the library at one o'clock, wasn't she?
11. The young woman wasn't reading in the library at two o'clock, was she?

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These questions, along with the short response and long answer, are well within the reach of a normal Level I class. Since classes differ in ability, one teacher may limit his expectations for one group of students to mastery of only the yes-, no- and or-questions (questions 3, 4, 5). Another teacher might expect a slightly higher group to master questions 3, 4, 5 plus one Wh-question for each slot -- thus expanding the expected mastery to include questions 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 (or 9). The high Level I group will have little trouble with any of the questions, and can reasonably be expected to master all eleven questions. Thus, pacing begins in the goals the teacher sets for his students. It is enhanced through classroom drilling.

Most frequently, drilling refers to such activities as repetition drills, chain drills, and transformation drills. Since these activities are frequently explained in methods texts, the focus here will be on ways in which they can be expanded.

The repetition drill per se is largely a matter of listen and repeat. By adding systems of visual cues, the exercise can also be used to teach reading skills, intonation patterns, and correct versus incorrect variations in sentence patterns.

Consider the model sentence again. The native speaker knows that one can say

The young woman was reading in the library at one o'clock.

At one o'clock, the young woman was reading in the library.

Both these sentences reveal the same information correctly. But it is incorrect to say

*The young woman at one o'clock was reading in the library.

At the very least, a sentence gives meaning in two different ways. First, it is a set of oral cues that occurs in a specific order to give meaning. This meaning-giving order changes from language to language. Second, the cues can be transcribed in writing. But, to be properly understood in the system of English, they must be read from left to right. This left-to-right orientation is in direct opposition to the way many Middle Eastern languages give meaning. Chinese, on the other hand, can be read in any direction since each word is read as a single form and has no direction for meaning.

Thus, at one and the same time, the teacher can be drilling oral and written questions and answers, as well as giving intonation practice to a highly literate student. (Such a student is also capable of structural substitutions as a prelude to composition.)

For a student who is semi-literate (particularly one who is unfamiliar with the spatial order of English), the teacher must combine oral drill with visual cues that encourage left-to-right movement across the page.

Finally, for a barely literate student, the teacher must combine oral skills with those that develop discrimination of sentence, word, and letter boundaries, in that order.

Thus enters the problem of pacing. The problem of pacing is almost entirely a matter of teachers going too fast, of covering material so rapidly that the student frequently does not have the opportunity to integrate it. The student often learns material on a recognition level, but not on a production level. This may be done with the best of intentions--to give students as much as possible. However, recognition of sounds, symbols and sentences is not mastery of them. Students need to master Level I structures because the more complex structures of English are built on the simpler ones. How then does one slow things down?

Basically what is described in the following section is a variation on the repetition drill. However, it is absolutely necessary to combine this work with obvious visual cues.

Return to the model sentence. "The young woman was reading in the library at one o'clock." The teacher emphasizes each slot (as he repeats the words in the slot) by moving from his/her right to left across the room. (Note that students who observe this observe a left-to-right movement.) As the teacher walks, he assigns specific slots in the space before him for the phrases.

The young woman | was reading | in the library | at one o'clock.

As students repeat, the teacher repeats with them at first, then he remains silent when they repeat the slots once more. This allows the teacher's voice to hold the group until some, if not all, members are comfortable enough to repeat loudly without fear of embarrassment from mistakes. Now the teacher points out the slots without using the correct order, so that the students are certain of the composition of each slot. He may point to the fourth slot, then the second, then the third, etc., until each slot is recognized as an entity within boundaries. The group still is responding in unison.

Next the teacher shows how the final "at one o'clock" is moved from the last position by visually "picking up" the slot and carrying it to the beginning of the sentence. He must also show how the period(.) after "o'clock" also travels with the slot, but it becomes a comma(,) in the new slot, indicating reverse or transposed order and a voice drop. In addition, a new period must be added to the end of the sentence to bound it. In the transposed order, "at" becomes "At" because the capital letter serves as an initial sentence boundary. Last, "The" becomes "the" because "T" is no longer the first letter in the sentence.

Another method of drilling this (or any other sentence) is to assign each slot to a finger on the left hand as it is held up (palm facing teacher) in front of the class. Thus, the ring finger becomes "The young woman", the middle finger "was reading", the index finger "in the library", and the thumb "at one o'clock." By folding the thumb down and raising the little finger, the movement of the last slot can easily be shown. As the thumb goes down, the fourth slot is moved to precede the first.

As students become proficient in recognizing and saying each slot, the teacher can begin to use his right hand to point out each slot. The students accumulate both individual slots and the slots as they appear in their meaning-giving order. Utilizing visual cues and gradually expecting the students to respond to them discourages mere rote repetition.

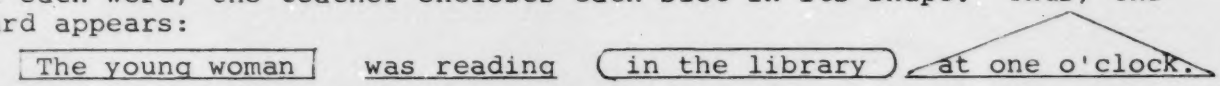
The student learns that he will soon be expected to produce oral work on his own. By associating the visual cues with the auditory sounds, the student is prepared for the next step, that of writing the sentence, questions and answers on the chalkboard. By copying the board work for homework, he is expected to master the day's classwork in anticipation of a weekly test.

For some groups, this method of drilling is often adequate. The students can understand that question words are substituted for each slot to elicit information. The final class drill and board work proceed relatively quickly. If the students have mastered the slots in the oral drill, then chain drills, substitution drills and question transformations should not be difficult.

There is still another method of slowing things down, particularly for those with serious literacy and/or learning problems, and for those students who have had absolutely no exposure to English before entering the class. This method has been particularly successful with a group of Southeast Asian students, some of whom have never written the English alphabet and some others who have not had more than two years of formal schooling. Note that this last method addresses itself to students of extremely limited ability. Because of this, the teacher limits the questions covered to the yes-, no- and or-questions -- with the expectation that the students will master these three forms completely.

As the teacher drills the slots in front of the class, each slot is visualized as having a geometric shape. Thus, the teacher uses his hands to frame a rectangle depicting "The young woman", slashes a straight line in the air for "was reading", draws an oval with the left hand for "in the library", and shapes a triangle for "at one o'clock." As the drill proceeds, the teacher moves to his own left (again, the class' right as he faces them) to draw their eyes in the proper direction.

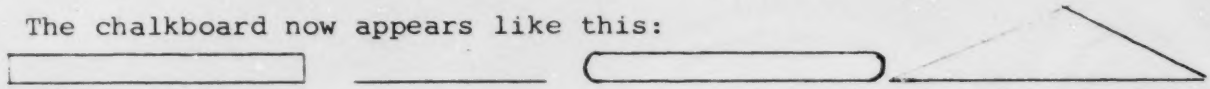
As students master the oral work and the hand movements in space as the teacher moves, the teacher turns to the chalkboard and writes each word in the sentence. The students repeat as he writes. After pointing out each word, the teacher encloses each slot in its shape. Thus, the board appears:



After drilling the individual items in each slot, the teacher erases one word at a time. He then points to the place in the slot previously occupied by the word, asking "What's this word?" Gradually students recognize each place in the slot as a word without looking at the word.

Remember, these are students having a high degree of difficulty with the language. By reducing a sentence of eleven words to a scheme of four shapes, each containing no more than three words, the visual cues have been greatly simplified without over-simplifying the sentence.

The chalkboard now appears like this:



To transform this sentence into the yes-question, the teacher indicates that _____ ("was reading") is really ___ _____ ("was" and

"reading"). The "was" moves to the front of the sentence and becomes "Was", "The" changes to "the", and the period becomes a question mark. The board looks thus:

1. W__ | the | _____ ( )

And the question answer is:

1. Yes, she ____.

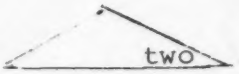
Yes, | the | _____ ( )

Substituting "two" for "one", the yes-question becomes a no-question.

2. W__ | the | _____ ( )

And the answer appears:

2. No, she ____n't.

No, | the | __n't _____ ( ) 

The or-question is the combination of the yes- and no-questions. Thus, the board appears:

3. W__ | the | _____ ( )

3. | | _____ ( )

With this method, students are allowed to "read" the symbols from the board as they do the oral work. When they have finished the oral work, which may run into a second class period, they copy the work from the chalkboard. At this point, the teacher can return the individual words to their places in the slots.

After all this drill, some students will not need to have the words written; they will know them (i.e., have memorized them) by this time. Some students will still need to copy everything exactly. Particularly at this level and with this kind of student, it is always best to assume that students do not understand the sentence and its various forms completely.

Many teachers feel torn, at times, between the desire to have their students learn as much and as quickly as possible and the knowledge that superficial treatment of a great deal of material leaves their students with nothing they can really use. Those teachers are not alone. It is important to remember that the ultimate goal is the student's ability to produce and manipulate these structures in all their variations, not merely to "understand" them. Language is a complex matter. If the teacher leaves his/her students with a thorough speaking and writing knowledge of basic structures, he has given them much. He must have the courage to believe "less is more."